

Al Bayan
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American Report: Rich people pay him money in aid and extortion; Bin Laden offers to leave Afghanistan

The Taliban movement announced yesterday that Osama Bin Laden offered to leave Afghanistan, but under two conditions. The first is the movement's assistance in his departure, and the second is that no one know of his new location except for the head of the Taliban, Mulla Mohammad Omar. This development came as reports, denied by the Taliban, discussed the agreement between Washington and the Taliban to deport Bin Laden to a third country.

Meanwhile, American sources spoke of Saudi businessmen giving aid and occasionally, extortion money, to Bin Laden.

In response to Bin Laden's offer to leave, a spokesman for the American State Department, James Rubin, said that "Bin Laden may flee from Afghanistan, but he cannot escape our resolve, adding "we have a very strong memory and he cannot escape from the long arm of justice." Earlier yesterday, Rubin discounted Washington's getting a quick response about Bin Laden's extradition to a third country where he could be tried. This was in response to reports of an agreement between the Taliban and Washington to deport Bin Laden, following high-level talks in Washington between American officials and the Taliban last week. A Taliban spokesman Reuters contacted in the southern city of Kandahar said that reports of extradition "were totally baseless."

An official in the American administration said that the new military government in Pakistan seems to have the key to any possible extradition of Bin Laden. He added that "the most probable opportunities of a major movement (happening) would be if the new Pakistani government were to decide that it sees no value in keeping the kind of relationship its predecessor had with the Taliban movement." An official expressed his belief that no one expected immediate movement.

In this regard, the Afghan News Agency mentioned that Bin Laden, about whose extradition the ruling Taliban movement is facing increasing pressures, offered to leave Afghanistan and head to another country to take the pressure off the Taliban. The agency, which is based in Pakistan, said that Osama sent a letter about this to Taliban leader Mulla Mohammad Omar in which he asked for the Taliban's help in reaching his new refuge. The agency said that Bin Laden specified two conditions for leaving Afghanistan: first, the help of the Taliban in his departure, and second, that no one know, except Mulla Mohammad Omar, the new country where he was going. The agency said that Mulla Mohammad Omar asked Bin Laden for two or three days to consult with his aides about this suggestion.

Meanwhile, the USA Today newspaper said yesterday that Saudi officials of companies continue to transfer hundreds of millions of dollars to bank accounts connected with Bin Laden. The newspaper quoted senior officials in American intelligence services as saying that transferring money began more than five years ago. The newspaper reported that this money was used to finance several of Bin Laden's attacks, including the attempted assassination of Egyptian President Husni Mubarak in Ethiopia in 1995. USA Today said that Madeline Albright, American Secretary of State, was expected to bring up this matter with Prince Sultan Bin Abdul Aziz, the Saudi Defense Minister, during his visit to Washington next week. This was later confirmed by James Rubin, spokesman for the State Department. The paper also referred to an audit report prepared by the Saudi government and obtained by American intelligence, which showed that five major Saudi businessmen ordered the National Commercial Bank, the biggest Saudi bank, to transfer personal amounts in addition to three million dollars from the Saudi pension fund to banks in New York and London. The report added that these funds were deposited in accounts of Islamic charitable organizations operating as fronts for Bin Laden. Intelligence sources said that the businessmen, whose wealth exceeds five billion dollars, paid Bin Laden extortion money to prevent attacks on their commercial interests in Saudi Arabia. USA Today clarified that the money transfer operations had been discovered in April after the Saudi government ordered an audit of the National Commercial Bank and its founder and former president, Khalid Bin Mahfouz. Intelligence officials said that Mahfouz is now a hostage (under house arrest) in a military hospital in the Saudi city of Taif. The American newspaper report added that his successor, Mohammad Hussein Al-Amoudi, also heads Capitol Trust Bank in New York and London, which American and British officials are investigating in connection with illegal money transfers to Bin Laden. The report said that Vernon Jordan, Al-Amoudi's lawyer in Washington, was not available for comment. The Saudi ambassador in Washington, Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, refrained from commenting on the report. - News Agencies